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ABSTRACT

This paper argues that writing teachers' emphases on orderly and polished products from their students have inhibited the ability to invent ideas and think clearly. The teaching techniques of the poet William Stafford are described as a model for teaching students to be more thoughtful. It is concluded that teachers of writing should first encourage their students to discover ideas before concentrating on ordering and polishing what they write. (TS)

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WHEN SHALL WE THREE MEET AGAIN?

When my high school English class got to Macbeth, we could get credit for recitation. Two friends and I seized upon the witches scene--in fact, if there was anything BUT witches in Macbeth, you couldn't prove it by us. Our version ran strongly toward Haloween masks and fright wigs, rolled up pantslegs and bare feet. Stomping and splashing, we generally spread ourselves. Our teacher, Miss Hamm, put up with our fooling around, and we certainly did learn those lines. "When shall we three meet again?"

When I ~~gave Jix Lloyd Jones~~ wrote the title for this speech, I was thinking about that high school time. The title seemed appropriate for this talk..., the notion of a threesome, and the idea that they may, or may not, meet again. There are, in fact, three aspects of writing; even though we English teachers spend most of our time on only two of them. The two we know so well or ordering and polishing. As teachers, we are really good in the arranging and organizing of ideas; we feel comfortable and competent explaining how to outline and how to make deliberate sequences. And in the polishing aspect we're good, too. We edit with sophistication, we know how to smooth out sentences, how to keep the words appropriate for the audience. We feel comfortable and competent doing the fine-grain finish work.

But what about that third aspect of writing?
Ten years ago I asked Dick Ohmann what he thought was wrong with most composition texts. He replied, "They all presume that the student already has the thoughts. What happens if the student doesn't?" I was struck by what he said, by the strangeness of so much apparatus to assist in the ordering and polishing of thoughts, and so little, if anything, about how to "get" thoughts. Someone put it this way: "Tomorrow's illiterates will not be the people who can't read; they will be the people who haven't learned how to learn."

That hole in our class, that missing third, really isn't too surprising. Indeed, the gap is most predicatable, given the tradition of rhetoric that carries at least as far back as Aristotle, and in the English language as far back as Wallace Douglas has traced it. Of course I refer to the famous Apollonian mode.

At one time in history of western civilization there may well have been equal recognition and appreciation for the dark, surprising unpredictable part of human mentation--the Dionysian mode. But certainly from Aristotle on, it is the Apollonian, the logical,

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the polished and predictable mode that we favor. In the English curriculum, the Scotts schoolmasters had it all; there may have been a few Irish druids amongst the stones and trees, but by and large they weren't running the schools.

It would be ironic if the emphasis on orderliness and polish has had an inhibiting effect on the quality of thought, on the whole process of thinking. Yet I suspect it has. A schoolborad member with a background in retailing once said to me that composition class taught people how to gift-wrap but it ought to teach how to go shopping. That may be overstating things a bit, but what would a class look like, what could you see, if the aim were to "get" ideas, to go shopping, as well as to order and polish.

I once saw Bill Stafford teach poetry to 15 high school students he'd never seen before and would never see again. I think if I could reproduce that session for you on videotape, you'd have a proper objective correlative for what I mean by "thought-provoking." It was a special demonstration arranged by a publisher to promote a new textbook series. It was Thanksgiving day, in a tiled room lined with windows that looked out upon a busy street. The students were from different schools and so did not even know each other, and they were handed a book they'd never seen before. Bill and the students were in the middle of the room on folding chairs. On either side sat groups of 20 to 30 teachers. Observing. There was nothing essentially "cordial" about the setting.

Bill seemed to tolerate a certain amount of discomfort, perhaps because he's a poet and is used to tensions which most of us ignore. At any rate, he waded right in, asking the students in turn what they thought poetry was. One bright girl gave a well-rehearsed textbook definition. One rather surly boy growled that he wasn't sure what it was but was sure he didn't like it. There were all shades between. To each answer Bill seemed to listen intently. Often he'd summarize what a student had said, sometimes nod and say, "Yes, a lot of people think that," and sometimes ask a question in order to be sure he'd understood.

Slowly there was a noticeable shift in the attitude of the students. At the beginning they seemed to be looking for the "right" answer, and felt put-off and frustrated. I imagine that they were accustomed to classes that had an agenda and "right" answers, and imagine that they were surprised to find themselves in the midst of a real discussion. Certainly they looked mildly surprised. Here was an adult, speaking quietly, not disagreeing, yet carefully examining what "thoughts" the students had brought in that day, and offering them the chance to pick up some new ones. At the end of the hour, for example, there was a consensus that speeches like Kennedy's "Ich Bein Ein Berliner," King's "I Have A Dream," and Lincoln's "Gettysburg Address" while in prose form and a matter of historical record are all examples of words used to alter reality, and that poetry, on the other hand, was the best

effort of the poet to make language work on reality in a real way. Those are ideas which the students didn't have when that lesson began. Indeed, the ideas were raw and new to most of us observers. But Bill didn't "give" students the ideas. Indeed, he spoke very little. By listening carefully, by avoiding judgements, by appearing to have no agenda whatever, and by making every step as important as the final step, he provided a climate where thoughts can happen. And in front of 50 English teachers he provoked 15 young people to abandon what they "knew for sure" in pursuit of what they might find out.

That kind of idea-finding can and should be a prelude to writing, and writing can itself be a prelude to more thinking. A class session chock-full of new ideas and high-voltage stimulation is a joyful experience, but to be "basic-to-writing," those ideas must be written, not mearly felt.

This working-back-and-forth between good discussion/thinking and good writing is what's often missing. Writing gets us in firmest touch with where our ideas live. And as surprising as the class discussions are, writing is even more surprising. Here I go into a writing, and out pops an ideas I never knew I had.

It takes some practice, "drafts" if you like, to learn how to catch ideas in writing. A lot of practice to show what makes good ideas good. A lot of courage to face a weak ideas, to discard or qualify it, especially when you were sooo fond of it.

I later heard Bill Stafford say of his own teaching, "I try never to answer a question I haven't been asked." How often do students get semester-long answers to unasked questions about order and polish, when what's at stake is a point of development much less clearly defined, but every bit as crucial.

I'm reminded of the story about the two fellas from the country, one partially deaf, who went to hear a speech from a very famous intellectual. After listening to fifteen or twenty minutes the hard-of-hearing one asked the other, "What's he talking about?" The other answered, "He don't say."

I think that every English teacher, myself included, has been taught that writing is primarily "statement," and our professional training has been addressed toward the organizing and polishing of that statement. But that's wrong. Or, rather, single minded. I think that every English teacher, myself included, needs and wants to learn more about the discovery of ideas, and how writing can do that.

To distinguish between the "discovery of ideas" and the "ordering and polishing of ideas" is not in any way to disparage the importance of the latter. Indeed, they are the final mark of rationality and most agreeable in their own right, and they also do indeed help clarify statements. But order & polish belong after the learnings, the discoveries, the ideas.

So, when shall we three meet again? He don't say.